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Intimate Partner Violence and the Process of Seeking Help: Im/migrant Women who Approached Anti-Violence Centres in Emilia-Romagna (Italy)

*Guiditta Creazzo, Emanuela Pipitone and
Anna Maria Vega Alexandersson*

Introduction

In recent years, a strong racialization of the problem of gender violence has occurred in the public domain in Italy. The overexposure by the media of episodes of sexual violence committed by immigrant men has tended to reduce the problem of male violence against women to the phenomenon of ‘rape in the street’ perpetrated by the ‘foreigner’. In spite of the growing body of available evidence that partners or ex-partners and people known to the victims are the most common types of perpetrators of violence against women (ISTAT 2007), the major part of the Italian mass media, the government and most political parties have promoted a public discourse on gender-based violence as a problem of im/migrant men’s criminal behaviour, to be tackled with public order measures. The institution of citizen patrols, the militarization of urban areas and the criminalization of irregular immigration have been proposed as the necessary measures to protect ‘our’ women – the Italian women – from the ‘brutality of foreigners’. In this cultural and political context, strongly characterised by exploitation and distortion, raising the problem of violence committed by im/migrant men against their wives or girlfriends is difficult. However, the question of violence suffered by foreign born im/migrant women at the hands of their partner (or ex-partner), who frequently – not always – come from the same country, needs to be confronted. Im/migrant women find themselves located at the intersection of systems of power – race, class and gender – that belongs to different geographical and cultural contexts and might produce in their lives further and unexpected tensions and conflicts (Raj and Silverman 2002; Sokoloff and Dupont 2005). From a number of studies they often emerge as being at in higher risk of intimate partner violence than the women born in the countries in which they have settled and as having additional obstacles to overcome in order to flee from the violent situations¹. The pertinence of focussing

1 See also ‘Migrant women: at particular risk from domestic violence’, Parliamentary Assembly, Doc.11991, 15 July 2009.

on the position and vulnerability of im/migrant women in relation to intimate partner violence has been recently recognised and reported on for the Council of Europe (Woldseth 2009).

This chapter explores the experiences of violence and the process of help seeking of im/migrant women victims of intimate partner violence, through the analysis of data collected by antiviolence centres in the region Emilia-Romagna. These data concern the whole population of women seeking help at these centres². In Italy, according to what emerged from the national violence against women survey, conducted by ISTAT (2007) on a representative sample of 25,000 women between the ages of 16 and 70, 2.8% of those who suffer repeated or serious violence by a partner asked for help from such centres. This survey also indicates that in Emilia-Romagna 38.2% of women between 16 and 70 years of age had been victims of physical or sexual violence during their lifetime and that 17.8% had been victims of physical or sexual violence at the hands of a partner. Amongst the latter group, 5.1% press charges against their partner (ISTAT 2007: 35–40). Unfortunately, no statistics on im/migrant women are available from this survey. All women counselled and/or housed have suffered violence. Previous studies have shown that the concrete act in itself is not enough to define the overall severity of the experience of violence (CAHRV 2006; Dobash and Dobash 2004). From this standpoint, the aims of our study were to analyse the types and severity of violence they suffered, considering multiple victimisation, the severity of violence and its impact on women's health; the referral sources; their needs and initiatives, highlighting similarities and differences between im/migrant and Italian women. Since in Italy the problem of violence by (ex)-partner and im/migrant status or ethnicity is a little investigated topic³, we frame our results by referring to the international literature.

Statistics on prevalence of intimate (ex)-partner violence according to ethnicity and/or im/migrant status are not univocal; they vary from study to study depending especially on the methodology used (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000; Rennison and Welchans 2000; Grossman and Lundy 2007). Menjíver and Salcido, on the basis of their review of scholarship, affirm that rates of (ex)-partner violence amongst im/migrant women are not higher than in the rest of the population (Menjíver and Salcido 2002: 901), while Raj and Silverman report studies attesting that immigrant women are at a higher risk of

2 The large majority of shelters and antiviolence centres in the region.

3 Italian research and studies on im/migrant women's experience of violence principally concentrate on trafficking, forced prostitution and female genital mutilations. We take the opportunity of mentioning here a research project on im/migrant women and violence – intimate partner violence included – launched in 2010 at the University of Padua Department of Sociology, directed by Prof. Franca Bimbi.

(ex)-partner violence (Raj and Silverman 2002: 367). In the European context, several prevalence studies on violence against women conducted in different countries find higher rates of intimate (ex)-partner violence against im/migrant women. In Spain, from the national survey conducted in 2006, 17.3% of im/migrant women compared to 9.3% of Spanish women were victims of on-going abuse, mainly perpetrated by (ex)-partner (Instituto de la Mujer 2006: 162)⁴. Condon and Schröttle's analysis of French and German data reveals not only higher rates of intimate partner violence against Turkish women in Germany and North African women in France (2006; also Condon 2005: 67), it also reveals that im/migrant women report higher levels of severity of violence, significantly higher rates of male dominance and control, and higher rates of threats of violence (p.42–44).

It is commonly recognised, however, that im/migration brings with it specific difficulties and vulnerabilities, linked to the fact of being a migrant, and to the conditions of reception in the host country. Several studies demonstrate that im/migrant women victims of intimate partner violence may have to overcome specific barriers to leave a violent partner and seek help. These include:

- legal barriers, particularly when the women are undocumented, worsened by the women's fear of deportation or other state sanctions;
- family and community barriers, as immigrant women may lack alternative support networks (extended families) or may more often encounter community and family resistance if they try to leave their partner;
- economic barriers, as they are likely to have an illegal job and face threat of deportation, or they more often have unstable and insufficiently paid jobs;
- language barriers, as they may not speak the native language and depend on official interpreting services that are not routinely available;
- institutional barriers, such as living far away from where services are located, or because of the professional background and/or lack of specific training of staff. (Narayan 1995; Dutton et al. 2000; Shetty and Kaguyutan 2002; Raj and Silverman 2002; Shetty and Kaguyutan 2002; Erez 2000).

All these conditions are consistently identified as barriers to help seeking also with regards to im/migrant women's use of shelters (Sullivan and Gillum 2001). On the basis of a systematic review of published literature, Raj and Silverman (2002) affirm that 'battered immigrant women are less likely

4 These women are defined as 'technically ill-treated', and suffered sometimes or frequently at least one type of physical, psychological, sexual, economic, spiritual or structural violence, at the time when the survey was conducted.

than non-immigrant battered women to seek both informal and formal help for IPV' (2002: 381; see also Erez 2000; Menjivar and Salcido 2002). Studies also suggest that shelters are a difficult resource for im/migrant women because they are perceived as being a 'point of no return', a refuge following an irreconcilable breakdown of the marriage (Erez 2002: 32). Our data suggest a different picture. In Emilia-Romagna, im/migrant women counselled and/or housed represent a minority group that has grown constantly over the years. Relevant and partially unexpected differences between im/migrant and native women appear during the help-seeking process and in the point in time when women ask for help at a centre. After describing these differences – which are the focus of our contribution – we discuss some factors that may have produced these results, the severity of violence suffered by women, their economic status and the consequent range of needs and requests they brought to the centres.

The national and local context of the study

Before the presentation of our findings, it is important to briefly contextualize the activities of antiviolence centres and the main characteristics of the im/migrant population in Emilia-Romagna. Antiviolence centres⁵ are a fundamental resource for abused women and an important source of knowledge on gendered violence, on abused women's needs and claims, on the actions they take to flee from violence (Dobash and Dobash 1992; Creazzo 2003; 2008a; Lyon and Lane 2008; Sullivan and Gillum 2001). They flourished in Italy at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, 10–15 years later than in other countries, and mainly developed in the central – northern regions of the country (Creazzo 2008b). With few exceptions, Italian centres are run by women's associations that are part of the women's movement, and have been instrumental in the public recognition of male violence against women as a multidimensional social problem. Each centre has its own telephone help line, usually functioning during working hours⁶, and publicised in local newspapers, TV and radio. It is important to underline that Italian centres operate mainly through intensive counselling, mostly without housing the women. In 2005, for example, of a total of 1271 women who contacted the centres, only 78 (6.1%) stayed in a shelter. Since 2006, a national tele-

5 It is important to notice that in Italy antiviolence centres do not always have a shelter. In Emilia-Romagna 6 out of 10 antiviolence centres provided also shelter.

6 Sometimes they guarantee 24 hours availability.

phone help-line for women victims of violence has been funded by the state Equal Opportunities Department.

The first Italian shelter was opened in Bologna (region capital) in 1991. Today Emilia-Romagna is amongst the regions with the highest number of antiviolence centres: one in each capital of its respective province. Most of them are partially funded by local authorities though much of the work relies on unpaid activists. They support women through a range of different activities (information giving, counselling, legal and psychological consultancy and sheltering) which mostly take place at the centre, whose address is publicly available. Centre workers avoid proactive interventions: women who need help usually contact the centre directly. They can phone or drop in – if in a crisis – during the centre working-hours. Emergency services working 24 hours a day are rare. Usually, health and social services, police forces and hospital emergency workers refer battered women to the centres. These agencies might be part of formally established local networks (multi-agency work).

As far as the im/migrant⁷ population residing in Italy is concerned, Emilia-Romagna is the fourth Italian region for numbers of im/migrant (about 421,000) after Lombardia, Veneto and Lazio (Caritas e Migrantes 2008)⁸. The estimated foreign born population regularly residing in the region has almost quadrupled since 1996. In 2005, the incidence of im/migrants in the whole regional population was 7.5%⁹. To estimate the presence of irregular foreign born im/migrants is obviously difficult. Considering the regulations of 2002, that followed the immigration amnesty (4 years after the previous one), that figure corresponded to about 30% of documented immigrants in that year (Regione Emilia-Romagna 2007: 19–20). On 1st January 2006 there were 289,019 immigrants legally registered residing in Emilia-Romagna, among which 48% (138,997) were women, 6.5% of the whole female resident population. 70% of foreigners come from Africa and Eastern Europe, the rest from Asia and Latin America. The increase in foreigners from Eastern Europe in the last years has been influenced in particular by the arrival of women working as house-keepers and care givers (Regione Emilia Romagna 2009: 12–15). About 75% of foreign residents are less than 40

7 The term 'im/migrant' identifies foreign born population residing in the country. The numbers results either from the Ministry of the Interior, responsible for the residing permit (*permesso di soggiorno*) or from the ISTAT (National Institute of Statistics).

8 As clarified by the authors, the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) estimates are usually lower, because they consider only legally registered resident im/migrant population (registered at the *anagrafe*) at 1st January of each year. Data from Caritas/Migrantes consider also foreigners with a permission of stay legally in Italy (*permesso di soggiorno*) which is counted at 31st December of each year.

9 This data include minors.

years old, compared with the 43% of the general population. Among foreign born im/migrant women over two-thirds (69.4%) of women are aged 15–49, while for the total female population this percentage is only 43.8%. The number of residence permits issued in Emilia Romagna has constantly grown: 50,450 were issued for women in 2001 and 111,073 in 2005. During this period, the proportion of permits issued to women for work rose from 37% (18,799) in 2001 to 47% (52,575) in 2005¹⁰. This indicates that women's migration is increasingly work motivated rather than simply for family reunification.

Methodology and objectives of the research

The gathering of statistical data concerning women counselled and/or housed in antiviolence centres is a routine activity for these centres in Italy. In Emilia-Romagna it has been supported and financed by the regional body and three surveys were carried out in 1997, 2000 and 2005¹¹. The number of centres that took part in the studies were 15 in 1997, 10 in 2000 and in 2005¹². A questionnaire common to all centres was used in order to collect data concerning both women who seek help and the activities performed by centre-workers supporting them. The adopted methodology was participatory action research, a strategy based on the direct participation of the parties involved in the subject to be investigated, and gives the opportunity of a guided and shared thinking process that is in itself the starting point of change (Gatenby and Humphries 2000; Wadsworth 1998). A working group of representatives from antiviolence centres who participated in all the research phases, from the questionnaire elaboration to the discussion of the final results, was established. The core of the data presented in this chapter concerns women victims of intimate partner violence counselled and/or housed in 2005. We decided to concentrate on this group because intimate partner violence is the most common form of violence suffered by women who sought

10 Data available from ISTAT website <http://demo.istat.it/altridati/permessi/index.html>. The 'motivazioni' are the reasons for the permission request, stated in documents.

11 A new survey started this year 2010.

12 A large group of workers belonging to regional antiviolence centres took part in this research project these researches. The centres who promoted research activities and have been involved in it were: Casa delle donne per non subire violenza, Bologna; UDI, Bologna; SOS Donna, Bologna; Centro donne e Giustizia, Ferrara; Linea Rosa, Ravenna; Casa contro la violenza, Modena; Nondasola, Reggio Emilia; Gruppo di lavoro contro la violenza alle donne, Forlì; Centro Antiviolenza, Parma; SOS Donna, Faenza; Casa Amica, Imola; Donne e Giustizia, Modena; Telefono donna, Piacenza.

help from antiviolence centres¹³. Data were collected between 1st January and 31st December 2005 by centre-workers¹⁴. Some of them were specifically trained for this purpose and then in turn trained their colleagues. Information was acquired in the context of counselling and/or housing and the questionnaires compiled after one or more interviews, in the absence of the woman, in order to avoid interfering with the counselling process. The questionnaire was compiled for every 'new'¹⁵ woman counselled and/or housed in the mentioned period of time. It comprises 89 questions that cover the following areas: the characteristics of the first contact of the woman with the centre; demographic and social characteristics of victims and perpetrators; the relationship between victims and perpetrators (which means different types of perpetrators and contexts of violence – father, mother, uncle, brother, employer, stranger, friend etc.); types (up to 43), duration and frequency of violence; consequences of violence at a social, psychological and physical level; violence suffered by children and the level of their well-being/unease; actions undertaken by women before/after the contact with the centre; results, and responses obtained; actions of the centre-workers and their results.

Women's experiences of violence were categorised in the questionnaire through a range of 43 items grouped under four macro-categories: physical, economic, sexual and psychological violence. The definition of types of violence was discussed with centre-workers that took part in the research and reflected the experiences of the women as perceived by them. The overall criteria followed in items definition was behaviourally specific as is recommended and commonly practised in representative national prevalence studies on violence against women (CAHRV 2006). The frequency of violent acts was measured considering whether they occur once or more than once; the severity of violence¹⁶ was measured through the construction of levels characterized by specific behaviour, to which was assigned a 'weight': highest levels correspond to higher severity. As far as sexual violence is concerned – for example – rape, attempted rape or to be forced to have sexual

13 A constant result of these surveys is that the large majority of women who seek help from these centres are victims of partner (ex) partner violence: 81.3% (959) of all women seeking help in 1997; 78.9% (847) in 2000; 80.1% (1 001) in 2005 (Creazzo, 2008).

14 The total number of antiviolence centres active in the region was 13. 10 centres took part to the research, 3 of them couldn't because of financial or organisational constraints. Of the 10 centres participating 6 had also a shelter.

15 This means that women counselled or sheltered in 2005, but in contact with a centre before 01.01.2005 were excluded.

16 We are aware that the severity of a violent event may depend on a number of variables: the context of the violence, the motivation and intention of the perpetrator, the physical and psychological differences between the perpetrator and the victim, the differences of social and economic power (Dobash and Dobash 1988; 2004).

intercourse with other men correspond to weight 3 (maximum severity); undesired sexual intercourse weight 2 (medium severity); verbal sexual harassment weight 1 (low severity). Then the weights were grouped into levels; so for example, women who suffered sexual violence at 'level 3' (the highest for sexual violence) have suffered at least one act of weight 3, alone or with others at a lower weight; all women who suffered at 'level 2' have suffered at least one violence at weight 2, alone or with others of a lesser weight. Physical violence is comprised of four levels of severity; sexual violence of three levels; economic violence, four; psychological violence, five.

Research findings

The comparison of data collected in 1997, 2000 and 2005 show a non linear increase in the total number of women asking for help from antiviolence centres in the region (table 1)¹⁷. However when the women's birthplace is considered, we see that the proportion of foreign born im/migrant women have grown constantly: there were 172 in 1997, 307 in 2000 and 464 in 2005. Even if some of them ask for help following experiences of trafficking and forced prostitution, the large majority suffer other types of violence, usually at the hand of known men: 134 in 1997, 199 in 2000 and 377 in 2005. Among all sheltered women the proportion of foreign women is even greater: 42.6% (23 women) in 1997; 64% (62 women) in 2000; and 78.2% (61 women) in 2005. The core of our data analysis, focused on women victims of partner or ex-partner violence, counselled or sheltered in 2005, offers some significant elements in order to understand this relevant result emerging from comparison.

Origins and demographic information

In 2005, a total of 986 women asked for help because of (ex)-partner violence¹⁸, 77.6% of all housed and/or counselled women (1271) in antiviolence

17 A detailed analysis of the possible reasons of the decrease of the number of counselled or housed women in 2000 was made in a previous work (Creazzo 2003). It shows that the decrease mainly concerns antiviolence centres that either couldn't guarantee full time work because of a reduction in financial or human resources available or centres that mainly function as telephone line.

18 Women forced to prostitution that also suffered violence by partners or ex partners were excluded due to the peculiarity of their situation. They were in total 15: 14 foreigners and 1 Italian.

centres. Of these 986 women, 652 were Italian (66.1%) and 334 were foreigners (33.9%). The perpetrators of violence originating from different countries number 236. From the cross-referencing between the country of origin of the perpetrators and the country of origin of the women, it emerges that a significant percentage of foreign women suffer violence from Italian partners or ex-partners: 36.8% (117). A lower percentage of Italian women are victims of violence from foreign partners: 5.8% (35). In 42.6% of cases they are mixed couples.

Im/migrant women counselled or sheltered in 2005 came from different geographical areas and had very different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The most represented areas reflect the origins of female foreign born population in the regions mentioned above – Central Eastern Europe (39.5%, 132 women) and North Africa (22.5%, 75 women). Central Southern America counts for 14.1% (47), Africa for 13.8% (46) (with the exclusion of Northern Africa), Asia for 6.9% (23) and the European Community for 3.3% (11). As expected, im/migrant women were significantly younger than Italian women: 79.8% (241) of them were less than 40 years old compared with 47.1% (278) of Italians, and 46.4% (140) were between 30 and 39 compared with 34.1% (201) of Italians. Even more relevant is the difference between those within the under 29-year-old group: 33.4% (101) of the im/migrants and 13.1% (77) of the Italians belong to this age group.

Just as for Italian women, im/migrant women who suffered partner or ex-partner violence were most often married. Italian women, however, were significantly more often separated (17.9%, 115 Italian compared with 7.3%, 24 foreign women). Very similar is the percentage of those who had children (85.1%, and 87.2% Italian women), bearing in mind that the children of one in seven of the im/migrant women (14.6%) live in the women's country of origin, a separation that is often painful for all concerned.

Legal immigrant status, language and education

Most (86.8%) of the im/migrant women have a residence permit, among which 39% were issued for working reasons, a lower percentage compared with the one recorded for the regional female immigrant population in the same year (47%). When asked to give the main reason for leaving their country of origin, a promise of marriage or a love relationship was stated by 59.2% (164) of women¹⁹. Over one in ten (13.2%) im/migrant women were

19 On 250 women with a residing permit, we know the reasons documented in the permit in 207 cases.

undocumented at the time they sought help, almost half were from Central Eastern Europe. It is not surprising that undocumented women counselled or staying in shelters represent a smaller proportion than regional estimate (as stated above, 30% of the regular im/migrant population). Some centres cannot shelter undocumented im/migrant women because of local authority restrictions, and women who find themselves in this situation may be more isolated because of fear of deportation and limited knowledge of Italian. In our research, 79.7% (251) of im/migrant women had a good knowledge of Italian language, 20.3% (64) did not speak Italian or spoke very little. Their education level was quite similar to the education level of Italian women (Table 2). This result mainly depends on the large percentage of women coming from Eastern Europe, who have a high level of education (data not shown).

Income, job and housing

A very high proportion of im/migrant women, 78.5%, declared they had an insufficient or non-existent income to support themselves and their children. Italian women declared themselves to be in the same situation significantly less often, yet a large number of them (63.2%) were in this situation. Since only 30% of Italian or im/migrant women live in households whose income is stated as insufficient or non-existent, the distressful economic conditions of so many individual women could be considered as a consequence of violence and as an indicator of the situation in which they find themselves when contacting a centre rather than a feature of their previous situation. They are in fact women restructuring their lives, changing house, work and sometimes locality. Congruent with this interpretation is the high percentage of women unemployed or looking for a new job: 33.3% of im/migrant women and 20% of Italian women (table 2). The majority of both im/migrant women and Italian women had a job (53.5% and 58% respectively). For im/migrant women, however, working conditions as well as housing conditions were more disadvantaged: more often they do casual, undocumented or unrecognised domestic work and they are less often home owners (data not shown).

Violence suffered by im/migrant women

Women victimised by their intimate (ex)-partner often suffered different forms of violence that overlap considerably. This is a well known pattern that also emerges from this research. Considering all macro-categories of violence –

physical, economic, sexual and psychological – only 168 (17%) women were victims of just one form of violence (26 victims of physical, 12 of economic, 130 of psychological violence). Im/migrant women, however, suffered more frequently from physical and economic violence than Italian women: 83.2% of foreign women suffered physical violence versus 64.9% of Italian women; 65.6% of foreign women suffered economic violence versus 48.3% of Italian women. They are therefore more often victims of multiple violence than Italian women: 91.2% (300) of foreign women versus 51.4% (495) of Italian women suffer different forms of violence ($p < 0.0001$).

Our analysis shows that im/migrant women suffer higher levels of violence more often than Italian women; these differences however are not always statistically significant (Table 3). Im/migrant women suffered physical violence of level 4 more often, like being injured by weapons or suffering attempted murder (15.5% versus 12.9% of Italian women); and of level 3 like being locked indoors or thrown out of the home (21.2% versus 12.2% of Italian women); they suffered less often violence of level 1 and 2 like being slapped, pushed or having their hair pulled. Im/migrant women were more often subjected to psychological violence of level 4 like being victims of threats of violence or of serious intimidation (36.7% versus 29.4%) and less often violence of level 1 like a total lack of sharing everyday work and responsibilities, adultery, deception, constant lack of communication (6.7% versus 13.4% of Italian women) and of level 2 like jealousy, limitation of personal freedom or other forms of control, (28.3% versus 33.2%). Foreign women more often reported sexual violence of level 3 than Italians: rape and attempted rape (35.5% versus 27.5% of Italian women) and less often sexual violence at level 1 (verbal and physical sexual harassment). They also suffered specific forms of violence, like strict forms of exclusion from their community or confiscation of documents.

These findings are confirmed by those concerning the impact of violence on women's health and well-being (Table 5): foreign women significantly more often than Italian women feel fear (57.8% versus 43.1% of Italian women); suffer bruises, burns and cuts (30.8% versus 21.8% of Italian women); are admitted to hospital (9% versus 4.6% of Italian women) and miscarry their child due to violence (3.9% versus 1.5% of Italian women). Less often than Italian women, however, they reported to suffering from depression and suicidal tendencies (12% versus 19.6%).

The process of help seeking

Im/migrant women were significantly more often victimised by a husband and significantly less often victimised by an ex-partner than Italian women (Table 3). This means that they tend to contact a centre at an earlier stage of the process of help seeking – when the decision of breaking the relationship is not yet taken. They also tend to ask for help significantly sooner than Italian women: 26.3% of im/migrant women compared to 15.4% of Italian women asked for help within 0–1 year after they suffered the first physical or sexual violent episode; 43.2% of im/migrant women compared to 30.5% of Italian women asked for help after 2–5 years; while 39.4% of Italian women compared to 16.3% of im/migrant women asked for help after 10 years²⁰. The average duration of physical or economic violence for foreign women seeking help is half the length reported by Italian women (five and ten years respectively), as it is for sexual or psychological violence (six and twelve years respectively).

Relevant and partially unexpected differences between the two groups were found also in relation to referral sources, in the needs expressed and in the intensity of the help seeking process. Im/migrant women significantly more often than Italian women arrived at centres because of the information received from the institutional sector: social and health services, police forces and hospitals; and less often, through informal contacts. Before asking for help from an antiviolence centre, they had in fact more contacts with the institutional sectors than Italian women: 40.7% of foreign women compared to 20.2% of Italian women had already made contact with a social worker; 23.7% had made contact with the emergency room at the hospital, compared to 12.6% of Italian women; 31.7% with the police forces compared to 22.7% of Italian women. This is not surprising considering the more disadvantaged economic situation of im/migrant women, on the one hand, and the more severe levels of violence they suffered, on the other. The range of needs brought by im/migrant women when they arrived at a centre tended in fact to be broader. They more frequently asked for an interview than Italian women (54.8% versus 42.2%) and were more numerous in a situation of crisis and asked for a room in a shelter (29.1% of foreign women versus 11.5% of Ital-

20 Considering the duration of violence – counted at the moment of the first contact with the centre – in class (0–1 year, 2–5 years, 6–10 years, more than 10 years) the differences are highly significant ($p < 0.0001$) for both physical-sexual violence and psychological-economic violence. We underline that out of 286 im/migrant and 440 Italian women who reported physical or sexual violence, we know the duration of violence for respectively 190 im/migrant women and 246 Italian women; out of 320 im/migrant and 616 Italian women who reported economic or psychological violence, we know the duration of violence for 231 and 393 women respectively.

ians) or sought help for housing or finding a job (19.2% versus 7.2% respectively). Less often they asked for professional psychological support or to take part in self-help or another type of support group. Finally, im/migrant women reported violence to the police significantly more often than Italian women: the 24.3% of the former against the 14.6% of the latter (<0.0001). Controlling for the severity of physical and of sexual violence, im/migrant women pressed charges against their partners more often than Italian women except for physical violence of level 1. The difference, however, remains significant only for sexual violence of level 3²¹: 72.7% (16) im/migrant women and 17.9 (5) Italian women reported these types of violence to the police (<0.0001).

Discussion and conclusions

In Emilia-Romagna, im/migrant women counselled and/or housed at anti-violence centres represent a minority group that has grown constantly over the years, a fact that cannot be explained by the increase in the foreign female population residing in the region. Even considering that among im/migrant women, 13% are undocumented, and others might have a resident permit but not be locally registered, there is still a difference that needs to be explained²². Im/migrant women counselled and/or housed undergo more severe violence, and come to the anti-violence centres sooner than Italians. Moreover, they had contacts with formal and informal agencies – like social workers, police forces and hospitals – and press charges against their (ex)-partner, more often than Italian women. In other words, they appear to be more active and more intensely seeking institutional help than Italian women. The most surprising of our research results is that of the higher proportion of im/migrant women who press charges. Studies in other countries have highlighted how much police reactions are often racist and affected by strong prejudice towards both victims and perpetrators from different countries (Mama 2000: 49–50). In consequence, women from discriminated, stigmatized groups do not trust the police and hesitate before denouncing violent partners.

21 This includes rape, attempted rape or sexual aggression, coercion to have sex with others and was reported by 50 women: 22 im/migrants and 28 Italians.

22 All im/migrant residing in Emilia-Romagna (*soggiornanti*) counted for the 7.5% of the regional population in 2005 – the 48% being female – (at 31.12.2005; Regione Emilia Romagna, 2007, 12). Registered im/migrant population counts for the 6.9% of the regional population (at 01.01.2006; idem 15).

As stated above, surveys conducted in Spain, Germany and France show that im/migrant women are victims of intimate partner violence more often than native women. The higher proportion of im/migrant women contacting antiviolence centres in Emilia-Romagna might then be the result of them being victims of partner violence more often than Italians, an hypothesis that can not be verified as we have no prevalence data available on the im/migrant female population. A different line of interpretation – not necessarily in contrast with the previous one – emphasising the role of economic/social conditions and of the severity of violence can be considered. Hence, the more economically disadvantaged conditions and the more severe violence suffered by im/migrant women – also resulting in the broader range of needs they described to workers at the centres – together with the paucity of familiar and/or informal resources characterising the im/migrant status, could become ‘push factors’. That is, rather than acting as ‘retaining factors’ these factors encourage im/migrant women to seek help more often and more intensely than Italian women both from antiviolence centres and the institutional sector. The research results of some United States studies seem to support this hypothesis. Strauss and Gelles (1995) and Johnson and Leon (2005; see also Johnson 1995) suggest that victims of violence who seek help may experience more abuse than those who do not and that, on average, the number of protective strategies that a woman uses increases with the severity of the violence experienced (Hamby and Gray Littke 1997). Others studies show that women with a lower income are more likely to ask for help from a shelter (Cattaneo and De Loveh 2008). As Sullivan and Gillum (2001) highlight most women decide to enter a shelter at a time of extreme crisis, because living collectively with many other women and children, having no or little privacy, and abiding by numerous rules is something they choose only as a last resort (2001: 248).

Some of these factors, especially the more severe violence reported by im/migrant women, are responsible for the higher proportion of those who press charges against their partner or ex-partner. Several studies conclude that the seriousness of the offence is the most important factor influencing victims’ decisions to report crime (Tarling and Morris 2010). There are, however, differences that remain. Considering how often im/migrant women have contacts with institutions, before approaching a centre, it is possible that reporting crime represents a positive action, making them appear as ‘reliable mothers’ and ‘faithful battered women’ to agencies that can offer them crucial resources to survive the violence (Creazzo 2009). Furthermore, the paucity of family and/or informal bonds available to them in Italy and a different perception of love and marriage (which for some have been arranged marriages), might contribute to making it easier for im/migrant women to break

the relationship with their partner and/or to consider intervention by family support institutions an acceptable solution.

In conclusion, our findings challenge the common stereotype depicting im/migrant women as more passive, helpless and subjugated to their violent partners and patriarchal relations than Italian women. The findings also do not give support to the idea that shelters are a difficult option for foreign born im/migrant women and suggest that, in the Italian context, there might be no need for specific services for this group of women. They tend to challenge a common stereotype that depict im/migrant women as more passive, helpless and subjugated to their violent partner and patriarchal traditions than Italians. At the same time, however, they suggest the possible existence of a ‘submerged reality’ of im/migrant women completely cut out from service provision. A reality made up of those who do not speak Italian, who are undocumented and/or are more severely controlled and isolated by their partners. We know that it exists from several testimonies, such as from cultural mediators working in hospital emergency rooms or elsewhere and from foreign women’s associations (Creazzo 2009). Most im/migrant women counselled or housed were in fact legal immigrants, speaking Italian and with a medium/high level of education, similar to those of Italian women. A crucial question raised by our results then is how to reach, to inform and to sustain im/migrant women who find themselves in the most dramatic situation as regards resources. And this is a situation exacerbated by the recent immigration laws approved by the Italian parliament (Romito et al. in this Reader).

Table 1: Im/migrant and Italian women by year of survey

| Origin of the Women | 1997 | | 2000 | | 2005 | |
|--|------|-------|------|-------|------|-------|
| italy | 1046 | 87.2% | 790 | 72.0% | 807 | 63.5% |
| Other countries | 172 | 12.8% | 307 | 28.0% | 464 | 36.5% |
| Total | 1218 | 100% | 1097 | 100% | 1271 | 100% |
| <i>Im/migrant Women Type of Violence</i> | | | | | | |
| Forced prostitution | 38 | 22% | 108 | 35% | 87 | 19% |
| Other types of violence | 134 | 78% | 199 | 65% | 377 | 81% |
| Total | 172 | 100% | 307 | 100% | 464 | 100% |

Table 2: Social and economic condition of women by country of origin: 2005

| Work Status | Other countries | | Italy | | |
|-------------------------------|------------------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|--------------------|
| Employed | 167 | 53.5% | 349 | 58.1% | |
| Unemployed/In search of work. | 104 | 33.3% | 120 | 20.0% | |
| Housewife | 34 | 10.9% | 69 | 11.5% | |
| Pensioner | 0 | 0.0% | 41 | 6.8% | |
| Disabled or unable to work | 1 | 0.3% | 11 | 1.8% | |
| Student | 3 | 1.0% | 6 | 1.0% | |
| Other | 3 | 1.0% | 5 | 0.8% | |
| Total | 312 | 100.0% | 601 | 100.0% | <0.0001 |
| Income of the Woman** | | | | | |
| Non existent | 122 | 40.9% | 146 | 25.2% | |
| Insufficient | 112 | 37.6% | 220 | 38.0% | |
| Sufficient | 64 | 21.5% | 213 | 36.8% | |
| Total | 298 | 100.0% | 579 | 100.0% | < 0.0001 |
| Income of Family ** | | | | | |
| Non existent | 5 | 2.0% | 8 | 1.6% | |
| Insufficient | 68 | 27.0% | 90 | 18.3% | |
| Sufficient | 179 | 71.0% | 393 | 80.0% | |
| Total | 252 | 100.0% | 491 | 100.0% | < 0.01 |
| <i>N</i> | <i>334</i> | | <i>652</i> | | |

*Percentages derived from the total number of employed women 349 Italian. 167 im/migrants.

**According to women's perception.

Table 3: Importance of current partners and ex partners among perpetrators of violence by country of origin of women: 2005

| | Other countries | | Italy | | |
|-----------------|------------------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|---------|
| Husband | 231 | 69.2% | 364 | 55.8% | <0.0001 |
| Live-in partner | 61 | 18.3% | 119 | 18.3% | |
| Boyfriend | 7 | 2.1% | 22 | 3.4% | |
| Lover | 1 | 0.3% | 2 | 0.3% | |
| Ex partner | 34 | 10.2% | 145 | 22.2% | <0.0001 |
| Total | 334 | 100.0% | 652 | 100.0% | |
| <i>N</i> | <i>334</i> | | <i>652</i> | | |

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